

Allan Kaprow

How to Make a Happening

Side 1

This is a lecture on how to make a happening. There are 11 rules of the game.

1. Forget all the standard art forms. Don't paint pictures, don't make poetry, don't build architecture, don't arrange dances, don't write plays, don't compose music, don't make movies, and above all, don't think you'll get a happening out of putting all these together. This idea is nothing more than what operas always did and you see it today in the far-out types of discotheques with their flashing lights and film projections. The point is to make something new, something that doesn't even remotely remind you of culture. You've got to be pretty ruthless about this, wiping out of your plans every echo of this or that story or jazz piece or painting that I can promise you will keep coming up unconsciously.
2. You can steer clear of art by mixing up your happening by mixing it with life situations. Make it unsure even to yourself if the happening is life or art. Art has always been different from the world's affairs, now you've got to work hard to keep it all blurry. Two cars collide on a highway. Violet liquid pours out of the broken radiator of one of them, and in the back seat of the other there is a huge load of dead chickens that is spilling out all over the ground. The cops check it out, plausible answers are given, tow trucks carry off the wrecks costs are paid and the drivers go home to dinner.
3. The situations for a happening should come from what you see in the real world, from real places and people rather than from the head. If you stick to imagination too much you'll end up with old art again, since art was always supposed to be made from imagination. Take advantage of readymade events: a factory fire, the fire trucks screaming to it from all sides, the water, the police barricades, the red blinkers—a natural. Or after a storm at the shore the debris washed up can be terrific. Or just take an afternoon off and watch women trying on dresses in a bargain basement. An awful lot can be done with images like these. If you get stuck for ideas, an exception to the slice-of-life idea is the greatest source book of our time, the yellow pages of the telephone directory. Break open the book at random, put your finger down at some point in the page and you'll come up with: private detective service, rug cleaning at home, cement blocks, airport limousine transport, judo lessons. You can get more out of these than out of all of Beethoven, Michelangelo, and Racine put together.
4. Break up your spaces. A single enactment space is what the theatre traditionally uses. You can experiment by gradually widening the distances between your events; first at a number of points along a heavily trafficked avenue, then in

several rooms and floors of an apartment house where some of the activities are out of touch with each other, then on more than one street, then in different but nearby cities, finally all around the world. Some of this can take place traveling from one area to another using public transportation and the mails. You don't have to be everywhere at once. You don't even have to be everywhere. The places you're in are as good as the places other participants are in.

5. Break up your time and let it be real time. Real time is found when things are going on in real places. It has nothing to do with the single time, the unified time of stage plays or music. It has even less to do with slowing down or speeding up actions because you want to make something expressive or you want it to work in a compositional way. Whatever happens should happen in its natural time. Suppose you consider how long it'd take to buy a fishing pole in a department store just before Christmas, or how long it'd take to lay the footings for a house. Well if a group wanted to do both in a happening, one of them would have to wait until the other was done. Maybe if it rained, that'd decide which came first. Of course, two groups could arrange both actions at the same time if that was wanted. But it isn't really necessary, except when people coming from different places have to catch the same train. Otherwise, why not let the amount of time you do something depend on what is practical and convenient for the particular actions in the happening. You can waste an awful lot of time trying to coordinate things.
6. Arrange all your events in the happening in the same practical way. Not in an arty way; avoid sonnet form, cubist multiple viewpoints, dynamic symmetry, the golden section, the twelve tone technique, theme and variation developments, logical or mathematical progressions and so forth. If a chicken cackles, roosts, pecks and lays eggs, take it for granted there's plenty of form there already. Nature can never appear formless because of the way the brain is made, so why worry? Just take things as they come, and arrange them in whatever way is least artificial and easiest to do. A gal was reading in the subway until, as if she's expecting it, her hairdresser gets up from another seat and unpacks his gear, and spends the next hour giving her a fancy do, calm-as-you-please, like it was his shop. A lot of people all covered with some sticky stuff were lying perfectly still all across a big lawn. The wind blows yellow and red leaves over them until they're covered solid. A truck loaded with shredded newspaper comes and carts them off. Fifteen or more cars on the Long Island Expressway going along with their brights on like a funeral. Now and then stream clouds of thin plastic film from their windows. They pull in the stuff quickly each time. Well suppose these three situations made up your happening? The subway thing would be easier to do, say, at 4 a.m. when the trains are pretty empty. You could count on lots of leaves dropping off the trees in late October when it's still warm enough to lie on the ground. And the procession of cars could be done on any day, just so long as everyone has his car handy at the time. The theory of alternating contrasts like night—day, night—action, quiet—action could cause you to arrange the three events closely together in the order of cars, subway, leaves. But that might be inconvenient, so string them out in whatever way is best for the participants, a

week apart if necessary. Some surprises might occur if you just forgot all the composition lessons you were taught. I remember that being flexible paid off one time. A group of people was to go to an automat and eat lunch when it was busy and crowded. At a signal, they would push a plate off the table, let it break, and quickly leave. The order of the events had to be switched around with another one. When it did take place, at that same moment a bus boy dropped a whole load of dishes on a floor. It couldn't have been more planned than that, but it wasn't planned at all.

7. Since you're in the world now and not in art, play the game by real rules. Make up your mind when and where a happening is appropriate. If your image calls for the president and vice presidents of Chase-Manhattan sitting in their biggest vault and throwing gold coins around like babies, and you can't get them to do it, then forget it and go on to something else. If you need to cut down lots of timber with chain saws whining and trees cracking, find a guy who needs some woods thinned out anyway. If you want a bulldozer to chew up some ground, find out where a development is going up and work the happening into the driver's regular job. You'll save a hundred dollars a day and might learn something about ground leveling. If you want to work with kids, discover what they really *can* do and like to instead of giving them something fancy you'd like to do but won't. Let them build something out of piles of trash, paint up some old cars in a junkyard, dig a huge hole at the beach. If you want to have all your participants start naked, swimming, making love or whatnot, there are times and plenty of places where it wouldn't stir up any dust. On the other hand, if you like being busted by the cops, you might think of working jail into the happening.
8. Work with the power around you, not against it. It makes things much easier, and you're interested in getting things done. When you need official approval, go out for it. You can use police help, the mayor, the college dean, the chamber of commerce, the company exec, the rich, and all your neighbors. Be your own public relations man; convince them all that what you're doing is worthwhile because it's enjoyable to play, just the same as it's enjoyable for them to go fishing. Its not a snap, of course, but they're convincible, and once on your side you can almost go to the moon.
9. When you've got the go-ahead, don't rehearse the happening. This will make it unnatural because it will build in the idea of good performance, that is, 'art.' There is nothing to improve in a happening, you don't need to be a professional performer. It's best when it is artless, for better or worse. If it doesn't work, do another happening. In any case, it's unnecessary to rehearse situations like eating your way through a room full of food, tearing down an old house, throwing love letters into a field and watching the rain wash off the ink, driving a bunch of cars off in different directions until they run out of gas. These aren't perfectible actions.

10. Perform the happening once only. Repeating it makes it stale, reminds you of theatre and does the same thing as rehearsing: it forces you to think that there is something to improve on. Sometimes it'd be nearly impossible to repeat anyway—imagine trying to get copies of your old love letters, in order to see the rain wash off those tender thoughts. Why bother?
11. Give up the whole idea of putting on a show for audiences. A happening is not a show. Leave the shows to the theatre people and discotheques. A happening is a game with a high, a ritual that no church would want because there's no religion for sale. A happening is for those who happen in this world, for those who don't want to stand off and just look. If you happen, you can't be outside peeking in. You've got to be involved physically. Without an audience, you can be off on the move, using all kinds of environments, mixing in the supermarket world, never worrying about what those out there in the seats are thinking, and you can spread your action all around the globe whenever you want. Traditional art is like college education and drugs: it's fed to people who have to sit on their butts for longer and longer amounts of time to get the point, and the point is that there's lots of actions somewhere else, which all the smart people prefer to just think about. But happenings have a plan and go ahead and carry it out. To use an old expression, they don't merely dig the scene, they make it.

Side 2

Now what about some examples of happenings. The impression most people have is that they're a wild and mad deluge of events pouring down, something like this:

Everybody's at a train station. It's hot. There are lots of big cartons sitting all over the arcade. One by one they start to move, sliding and careening drunkenly in every direction, lunging into commuters and one another accompanied by loud breathing sounds over the public address system. Now it's winter and it's cold and dark, and all around little blue lights go on and off at their own speed while three large gunny sack constructions drag an enormous pile of ice and stones over bumps, losing most of it, and blankets keep falling over everything from the ceiling. A hundred iron barrels and gallon wine jugs hanging on ropes swing back and forth, crashing like church bells, spewing glass all about. Suddenly mushy shapes pop up from the floor and painters slash at curtains dripping with action. A wall of trees tied with colored rags advances on the crowd, scattering everybody, forcing them to leave. Eating is going on incessantly, eating and vomiting and eating and vomiting, all in relentless yellow. There are Muslim telephone booths for all with a record player or microphone that tunes everybody in on everybody else. Coughing, you breath noxious fumes of the smell of hospitals and lemon juice. A nude girl runs after the racing pool of a searchlight, and throws water into it. Slides and movies projected in motion over walls and hurrying people depict hamburgers, big ones, huge ones, red ones, skinny ones, flat ones

and so on. You push things around like packing crates, words rumble past whispering, “Dee-dah, Bah-room, Lovely, Lovely, Love Me.” Shadows jiggle on screens, power saws and lawn mowers screech just like the subway at union square. Tin cans rattle, soaking rags slush and you stand up to shout questions at shoeshine boys and old ladies. Long silences when nothing at all happens when—*bang*—there you are facing yourself in a mirror jammed at you. Listen, a cough in the alley. You giggle, talk to someone nonchalantly while eating strawberry jam sandwiches. Electric fans start, wafting breezes of new car smell past your nose as leaves bury heaps of whining, burping, foul pinky mess.

Actually, the happenings are much less complicated, and there’s a stronger give and take between the environment and its participants. A typical program will read like this:

Naked women eat giant bowls of Cheerios and milk atop a mountain of used tires. Children disgorge barrels of whitewash over the mountain. A hundred yards away, men and women swimmers in brightly colored plastic pools continually leap out of the water to catch with their mouths rubber gaskets festooned with lifesaver candies that hang from chains of mens’ belts. The mountain is taken down tire by tire and moved into the pools, and the water spills out. The children tie the adults together with the belts, they pour whitewash over the now-still heaps of bodies. Then they buckle dozens more of the belts around their necks, waists, and legs. They take the remaining lifesavers to a factory-fresh tire shop and offer them for sale in laughy voices.

A program is nothing more than a short list of situations or images jotted down on a few sheets of paper. Sometimes they have some notes attached at the end. These programs are sent out to a group of people that might be interested in participating. Those who are come to a meeting where the happening is discussed and the practical details of who does what and when are ironed out. Then, as soon as possible, the piece is put into action. I’d like to read three programs now, but before I do, it ought to be clear that what I read is just literature, not the happenings themselves.

Soap

1st morning: clothes dirtied by urination

1st evening: clothes washed

(in the sea)

(in the laundromat)

2nd morning: cars dirtied with jam on a busy street

cars cleaned

(in a parking lot)
(in a car-wash)

2nd evening: bodies dirtied with jam

bodies buried in mounds at the sea edge

bodies cleaned by the tide

The notes to “Soap” read as follows:

1st morning and 1st evening:

Each person privately soils some article of his own clothing. This is essential, for it refers to one’s real experiences as an infant. In this act the person mingles his own water with the water of the sea or laundromat, and consequently makes the cleansing of his clothing inescapably personal.

2nd morning:

Cars should be methodically and thoroughly smeared with jam, within the sight of passers-by. The washing should be done as diligently. If a commercial car-wash is used, one should have this done as though nothing were out of the ordinary. Any questions asked should be answered in as noncommittal a way as possible.

2nd evening:

A vacant stretch of beach is best. Either couples or individuals may perform this. There should be long distances between each individual or couple. In the case of couples, one person covers the partner (who is preferably naked) with jam, digs a hole for him (or her) with sand to the neck, and sits quietly watching until the tide washes the partner clean. Then they depart.

The next happening is

Calling

In the city, people stand at street corners and wait. For each of them a car pulls up, someone calls out a name, the person gets in, and they drive off. During the trip, the person is wrapped in aluminum foil. The car is parked at a meter somewhere, is left there locked, the silver person sitting motionless in the back seat. Someone unlocks the car, drives off. The foil is removed from the person, he or she is wrapped in cloth or tied into a laundry bag. The car stops. The person is dumped at a public car garage and the car goes away. At the garage, a waiting auto starts up. The person is picked up from the concrete pavement, is hauled into the car and taken to the information booth at Grand Central Station. The person is propped up against it and left. The person calls out names and hears the others brought there also call. They call out for some time. Then they work loose from their wrappings and leave the train station. They telephone certain numbers. The phone rings and rings, finally it is answered, a name is asked for, and immediately the other end clicks off. In the woods, the persons call out names and hear hidden answers. Here and there they come upon people dangling upside-down from ropes. They rip the people's clothes off and go away. The naked figures call to each other in the woods for a long time until they're tired. Silence.

The notes to "Calling" read as follows:

1. Places other than the train stations and times are to be decided just prior to performance.
2. Performance should preferably take place over two days, the first in the city and the second in the country.
3. At least twenty-one persons are necessary to perform this happening properly. For this number, six cars are required. Thus, there would be three persons waiting at street corners, a car containing three people including the driver, to pick each one up, and a matching number of second-stage cars also manned by three people to carry the wrapped persons to the railroad station. But this basic number of participants can be multiplied proportionately for as large a group as is desired.
4. Names used throughout are to be the names of those involved.
5. Wrappings of foil and cloth should be as thoroughly applied as possible, the face covered except for a breathing gap.

6. Second-stage cars should be parked at a pre-chosen self-service garage, widely separated from others. Drivers then proceed to parts of city where first-stage cars are parked at meters. There, the two drivers exchange car keys, the first-stage trio hurrying to garage positions where they enter the autos and await the arrival of the human packages. The latter, of course, are brought by the second-stage trio. Timing for this and all other stages of the event must be worked out exactly.
7. The cars depositing packages at garages next proceed to the homes of their drivers where phone calls will be received.
8. After the human packages unwrap themselves at the information booth, calls should be made from a public booth to the drivers of the last mentioned cars. Phone is allowed to ring fifty times before it is answered. Answerer says only, "Yes?" Caller asks if it is x , stating the right name, and x quietly hangs up.
9. The people hanging from ropes in the woods are those who drove and accompanied the cars the day before. An exchange of positions takes place here, underscored by the inverted positions on the ropes, with the former package people taking the active role. There should be no less than five bodies suspended, although all car people may choose to hang this way. If less than the total of, say, eighteen, the others should sit motionless between each rope and join in the answering and the calling of names. When called from afar by the package people, the answer is simply, "Here. Here," until each body is found and violated.
10. The package people arriving at the woods call out the names of the car people hidden over a wide area among the trees. Moving as a group, they follow the sounds of the voices and reach each dangling figure. Its clothes are rapidly cut off and after all have been so treated, the group leaves. Each suspended person and those sitting beneath him should cease answering to their names when found. Gradually the answering will diminish to silence, and at that point they start to call out each others' names like children lost.

The last happening is called:

Raining

Black highway painted black
Rain washes away

Paper men made in bare orchard branches
Rain washes away

Sheets of writing spread over a field
Rain washes away

Little gray boats painted along a gutter
Rain washes away

Naked bodies painted gray
Rain washes away

Bare trees painted red
Rain washes away

The notes are simply that

Times and places need not be coordinated and are left up to the participants. The action of the rain may be watched if desired.